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DEPARTMENT FOR WHA/CEN

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SUBJECT: PANAMA: GOP HOLDS CABINET MEETING IN REMOTE DARIEN
PROVINCE

Classified By: POLCOUNS BRIAN R. NARANJO. REASONS: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

SUMMARY

¶1. (U) The extreme poverty of Panama's Darien province should be a source of shame to the country, President Martin Torrijos said at the April 27 cabinet meeting he convened in Santa Fe, one of the last towns in the province before the Interamerican highway ends. The meeting was intended to offer a public review and accounting (Rendicion de Cuentas) of the GOP's activities in the Darien. It was the latest in a series of field cabinet meetings the Torrijos Administration has held in provincial capitals throughout the country. The four-hour townhall style event, attended by POLOFF, also featured distributions of land titles, presentations by various officials on GOP projects in the province, and remarks by local residents.

\$30 MILLION TO FIGHT POVERTY

¶2. (SBU) The event opened with a series of land title distributions that Torrijos handed personally to each recipient. The individuals wore numbers on their shirts to indicate the order of the distribution, and POLOFF noted numbers up to the 300s, suggesting the majority of the audience in the gymnasium/auditorium were land title recipients. (Comment: This may have contributed to the overwhelmingly pro-GOP attitudes of the audience.)

¶3. (SBU) Following the first tranche of distributions, Torrijos opened the Cabinet meeting and addressed the group. Torrijos heavily promoted the GOP's Network of Opportunities program as a way to address the high poverty levels in the Darien. The Cabinet approved implementation of the program's \$30.4 million second stage at the meeting. The Cabinet also approved a project to bring electricity to various parts of the province. While highlighting the GOP's current projects in the Darien, Torrijos criticized those who "only recently discovered" the region's poverty, calling it a persistent problem of long standing. (Note: Recent press reports had focused on poverty in the Darien, including the death of a young girl from malnutrition, first reported by UNICEF. UNICEF's aggressive posture regarding the plight of marginalized children in Panama has chilled GOP relations with this UN body.) Such enduring poverty was the shame of all the administrations that had governed Panama, added

Torrijos.

EVERYONE LOVES MARTIN- AND OPERATION MIRACLE

¶3. (U) Following the Cabinet meeting, which mostly consisted of the different ministries reviewing their respective projects in the Darien, the bulk of the program was the presentation of Darien Province Governor Juana Lopez. She delivered a PowerPoint presentation with a long succession of slides listing various projects and programs in the province, some of which were the same as those mentioned previously. The Governor focused particularly on the work of the First Lady's Office, and praised effusively First Lady Vivian de Torrijos's work with Cuba's Operation Miracle. (Note: The Governor made no mention of any USG-funded initiatives in the Darien.)

¶4. (C) The first in what became a series of obviously choreographed testimonials by local citizens began during the Governor's presentation. One after another, a meticulously selected mixture of Darien residents -- including a person with disabilities, indigenous persons, mothers with babies for the President to kiss, senior citizens, and others -- took to the microphone to express their gratitude to the President for his work on behalf of the Darien. Every speaker was enthusiastically positive, and nobody mentioned anything negative in their comments. After several hours of such testimonials, Torrijos finished the distribution of land titles to conclude the event.

COMMENT

¶5. (C) This was a unique opportunity to observe one of the GOP's field cabinet/town hall meetings. POLOFF attended the event at the invitation of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), which administers some U.S.-funded assistance projects in the Darien. IOM had understood the event to be a donation ceremony involving some of these projects. In reality, the Governor only gave a brief mention of IOM at the end of her long presentation. The GOP was eager to take credit for IOM's work, a phenomenon we have witnessed with respect to U.S.-supported efforts.

¶6. (C) The overly rehearsed nature of the testimonials from the carefully-assembled group of residents (most of whom were receiving land titles), combined with their one-sidedly positive comments about the GOP, gave the event a highly staged, unreal quality. Overall, the event was a cheerleading session first and foremost for Torrijos and second for the GOP, not an honest discussion or exchange of ideas on the Darien's needs. The sunny praise from the audience contrasted sharply with the marks of poverty visible on all sides -- for example, the crumbling auditorium, the lack of plumbing or bathroom facilities, the unpaved roads, and children and adults with worn clothing and no shoes. Whether the GOP can effectively alleviate the "shame" of poverty in the Darien remains a test of the Torrijos Administration -- and likely, of many administrations to come.

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